Ryan Aide Quits Hospital, Recalls Terror of Guyana

1-16-79

By J. Regan Kerney
Washington Post Staff Writer

Two months and seven operations after the ill-fated day in Guyana that has scarred her with gunshot wounds and a spate of tragic memories, Jackie Speier left Arlington Hospital yesterday vowing to continue the work of her late boss, Rep. Leo J. Ryan (D-Calif.)

She left behind a team of doctors, whom she praised, although they were unable to restore the full use of her shattered right arm or remove a bullet from her pelvis.

And she brought with her a team of U.S. marshals who have guarded her around the clock against threats she refuses to discuss since she was wounded and Ryan and four members of his party were killed Nov. 18 in Guyana by members of the People Temple cult.

At a brief news conference before leaving the hospital in a wheelchair, Speier announced she was considering running for Ryan's seat in a special March primary, and recalled his last words to her in a steady, tired voice.

"He was shot the first time in the neck, and he was moving toward me, and then he said something like, 'Jackie, take over.'"

Speier was critical of the U.S. government, which she said was at least partly to blame in the deaths of 900 cult members many of who drank a poisonous punch at the orders of their leader, the Rev. Jim Jones. She declined to single out any particular agency, but said that even Congress had been unresponsive to complaints by disillusioned former cult members.

Later, in the Capitol Hill offices Ryan's successor will inherit, Speier recalled the confusing moments when a handful of cult members pulled up at Port Kaituma airstrip near Jonestown and began firing at Ryan, his party and 16 cult members who had chosen to leave with them despite Jones' entreaties.

"I've never heard gunshots before," she said. "I was very much resigned to dying. I just wanted the gunfire to stop." Her doctors later told her that the three shots that hit her were fired from point blank range, she said. NBC News correspondent Don Harris, who was lying under an airplane next to her, was killed. yan, lying only five feet away, had at least 12 gunshot wounds in his back.

Speier calmly recalled her visit to the cult's commune, where she and Ryan spent the night before the fatal incident. "They didn't want to talk to the lady lawyer," she said, referring to her role as Ryan's legislative counsel. "Jones feared two things—the media and lawyers."

But she was allowed to talk with Jones, and said he looked ill. She estimated that he had lost about 30 pounds since May, based on photos she had seen at a U.S. Embassy briefing in Georgetown, Guyana's capital, before going to Jonestown.

"The man was broken," she said. "He was not a man who could lead a group of people. The structure was crumbling."

She said that cult members were first reluctant to talk freely with the Ryan group, but slowly began approaching with requests to be taken home. "There were individuals who wanted to leave but felt they couldn't under their own power," Speier said. "There was no doubt that there was mind control. They had old people, young people, children standing up and singing. You knew they had been drugged. I felt very eerie about the whole thing."

Speier said she hoped the House International Relations Committee would press further in its investigation into Ryan's death, and called for "corrective legislation" to prevent another Jonestown.

"We just can't afford to have this tragedy occur again," she said.

By Tom Allen—The Washington Post

Jackie Speier . . . critical of U.S. government